

Nuno and Beyond

Wendy Bailye

Having been asked to write an article on Nuno felting, it seems an appropriate time to define what nuno felt is. Polly Stirling and Sachiko Kotaka originally coined the phrase. I quote from Polly's website:

"In 1990, I became entranced by the myriad of transformations of the rich and ancient textile called felt. I spent most of the ensuing decade seeing what new forms could evolve, as appropriate for the subtropics of Australia where I had lived for nearly 20 years. The techniques I developed for making lightweight felts soon led to experiments combining other materials, and in 1994 my assistant Sachiko Kotaka and I developed the technique we termed "Nuno Felt." By manipulating a minimum amount of wool fiber through a fine base weave we could make a felted fabric with characteristics quite different from traditional felt. Nuno felt is lightweight with drape and flexibility. (Ref 1)

"Nuno felting is a fabric felting technique developed by Polly Stirling, a fiber artist from New South Wales, Australia, around 1992. The name is derived from the Japanese word "nuno" meaning cloth. The technique bonds loose fibre, usually wool, into a sheer fabric such as silk gauze, creating a lightweight felt. The fibres can completely cover the background fabric, or they may be used as a decorative design that allows the backing fabric to show. Nuno felting often incorporates several layers of loose fibres combined to build up colour, texture, and/or design elements in the finished fabric. The nuno felting process is particularly suitable for creating lightweight fabrics used to make clothing. The use of silk or other stable fabric in the felt creates fabric that will not stretch out of shape. Fabrics such as nylon, muslin, or other open weaves can be used as the felting background, resulting in a wide range of textural effects and colours."(Ref 2 and 3)

Since 1992, the term "Nuno felting" has become known around the world and felt makers have embraced the special alchemy of joining fabric and wool together using felting processes.

As a felt maker who is particularly interested in surface decoration and manipulation, I have found the use of fabrics in my feltmaking practice extremely inspiring and rewarding. I use fabrics as a base but also as surface embellishment. I have a large collection of small samples which I have made over the years whilst experimenting with different fabrics, seeing if they will "felt in". I find the making of samples indispensable to my work process and would recommend it to you as something very useful. There is nothing more frustrating than making a large piece of felt with added fabrics and realising that the

fabric just doesn't felt in. A small piece of felt with the "unknown" fabric added will only take a couple of minutes to felt and will save you time, frustration and money!

Fabrics I have always had success with without special measures – fine cotton muslin, fine cotton voile, tissue silk, silk georgette, silk chiffon, crinkle silk, silk paj and silk organza 6 momie or less. Silk over 6 momie will require special effort. Momie indicates fabric weight eg, 3.5 momie is very fine. My personal preference is using natural materials but I have done many experiments with synthetics. Some synthetic fabrics I have had easy success with are synthetic crystal organza, fine soft nylon net, soft bridal tulle.

Fabrics that can be felted with more effort - cheesecloth, fine to medium weight viscose rayon, hessian, silk and metallic thread fabric, stretch synthetic nets, beaded and embroidered silks, antique cotton lace both thick and thin, handwoven Thai silks that have a drapery handle, up to 10 momie organza, hand knits, hand crochet thick or thin and hand woven fabrics.

Nuno felt can have fabric as a base fabric in the centre (sometimes called laminated felt) or fabric as surface decoration-or a combination of all three.

As with all felt the most important part of the felting process is the fulling. Nuno felt is no exception. Nuno felt needs to be well filled in order to wear well. Sadly many of the nuno felt scarves and garments sold today are very soft and not filled very well. Just because the wool has stuck to the fabric doesn't mean it is finished! Hardening of the nuno felt needs to be done thoroughly and a shrinkage rate of 30-50% should be expected. The rate of shrinkage will of course depend of the percentage of wool to fabric and the coverage/thickness of the wool layers. As you full your nuno felt it will shrink and crinkle. If you want a flatter felt just stretch the piece very firmly and stretch out the crinkles this will give you more size in your finished article. If you want length stretch lengthways or width stretch widthways.

Another important factor in nuno felting is matching the wool type to the project/fabric you are using. If you are using fine silk then a good match in fibre would be 18 micron fine merino as would a 14 or 16 micron merino which would be a felt makers dream!

Using a 24 micron crossbred wool would result in a hairy coarse felt which would not be a good match for a fine silk scarf but would be perfect backed with muslin as a bag. If you are purchasing wool ask what micron the wool is, if the person who is selling doesn't know buy your



wool elsewhere!

So Nuno and beyond. Where shall we all take this marvellous mixing of fibre and fabric?

Well, I shall share my latest imagining with you - one idea that I have yet to explore fully is to make my own free machine stitched embroideries and fabrics and to felt them. I am excited about the prospects of this idea but haven't had enough hours in this busy year to explore the possibilities, maybe next year. Perhaps you will run with the idea and I will have to think of something new! My passion at present is using recycled fabrics. It gives me a good excuse to op shop a lot. I have found that Millers brand rayon shirts felt in beautifully! We are a very creative bunch and who knows what may be next? Blessed are the Felt Makers.

Wendy Bailye works as a full time Felt Artist. She is presently running a travelling Felt Studio at the major Craft and Quilt Fairs around Australia.

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References

1. Polly Stirling wildturkeyfeltmakers.com
2. ^ Ziek, B. (2004). The felt frontier: I: Polly Stirling: Contemporary feltmaker. Surface Design Journal, 28(4), 35-38
3. Wikipedia "Nuno Felt"

Felting Hints:

Dip your dreads in boiling water and then cold water to firm them up at the end of felting. Stretch them and roll them in between to avoid crinkly dreads.

A simple dye for silk is made with tea. Save your old teabags and boil them up in some water. Turn to low and simmer some silk fabric for a gorgeous caramel colour. Try tie dyeing the fabric with rubber bands for a bit of fun.

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